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Twenty First Century Deterrence – Moving Beyond the Balance of Terror

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Introduction

During the Cold War, the debate over the role of nuclear weapons in national security and the key ingredients for deterrence was robust. However, at the conclusion of the Cold War, thinking about deterrence atrophied. The rise of terrorism as a primary security concern and the advances in U.S. conventional military superiority pushed thinking about nuclear weapons and policy to the back burner. As international relations scholar Thérèse Delpech has noted, "Foreign policy, notably Western foreign policy, continues to be made under the shadow of a nuclear strategy that is almost forgotten or that is becoming empty."¹ As the global security environment changed, becoming more complicated and potentially more dangerous, policy makers again began to question the role of nuclear weapons and deterrence in national security policy.



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Because thinking on deterrence and nuclear weapons had withered in the post-Cold War years, policy makers immediately fell back on the “stable Balance of Terror” tenets for the reliable and predictable functioning of deterrence—a Cold War formulation that equated national vulnerability to nuclear annihilation with “stability.” The inattention to deterrence meant that military and civilian leaders “lack the foundation of experience for understanding nuclear deterrence,” meaning that much of the nuance of the debate surrounding the Balance of Terror has been lost.² Further, the complexities of the modern geopolitical environment call into question whether the Balance of Terror tenets are even appropriate for the security challenges the United States now faces. As Keith Payne has written, “Lingering Cold War expectations that deterrence can be orchestrated to perform predictably and reliably should at last be discarded.”³ But if they are discarded, what remains? How does deterrence adapt for 21st century threats?

21st Century Deterrence

The 21st century is marked by multiple adversaries with different national security requirements, shaped by their individual cultures, history, geography, leadership and decision-making styles. Cold War thinking on deterrence was dominated by the assumption that any rational leader, regardless of ideology, would be deterred from nuclear confrontation by the threat of assured destruction. This assured destruction metric was easily quantifiable, and proponents assured that it would work reliably and predictably. However, as the Cold War falls further away in history, the assumption of deterrence being “easy” is being challenged. For example, “Highly confident assertions and predictions are no more suited to deterrence and force acquisition than they are to other extremely complex behaviors by specific individuals whose decision making often is done under great stress, and who may be influenced by many variable, obscure and idiosyncratic factors.”⁴ This shift to “difficult” deterrence means that deterrence needs to be tailored to the unique factors of individual adversaries.

Although there is a realization that deterrence now may be more difficult than in the past, the tenets of the Balance of Terror philosophy are still being applied to today’s more complex security situation. As Payne suggests, “Those that continue to employ the balance of terror tenets, metrics and terms of art do not appear to appreciate the extent to which their expectations of the opponent are a reflection of their own cultural norms and the peculiar conditions of the Cold War.”⁵ The historical record has shown that the Balance of Terror orthodoxy provided outsized confidence in the predictability of deterrence. Indeed, “Deterrence effect cannot be orchestrated predictably, and is not the inevitable consequence of any particular technical/force relationship. Predictable deterrent effect would require a world that neither exists nor appears to be taking shape.”⁶



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Those that accept the Balance of Terror paradigm tend to categorize both strategic and conventional forces as “stabilizing” or “destabilizing,” with arms control measures facilitating stability and any sort of damage limitation as destabilizing. As Delpech has noted, “Public statements are still made on the necessity to preserve or even strengthen ‘strategic stability’ (generally to reassure Russia and China), but the meaning of these two words is increasingly unclear.”⁷ This broad categorization fails to recognize that there are “factors other than force structure [that] are decisive in the pertinent decision making” of opponents.⁸ Therefore, the simple categorization of strategic capability as stabilizing or destabilizing downplays or ignores the variety of factors that influence an adversary’s decision making calculus and behavior, meaning these designations are increasingly hollow for describing the effectiveness of deterrence.

How much is enough now?

The Balance of Terror offered a metric for deterrence that made the question of “how much is enough?” with regard to nuclear capability quantifiable. But if the Balance of Terror metric no longer applies to 21st century deterrence, how does the United States determine how much is enough now? Some scholars argue that “U.S. nuclear weapons now offer little or no added value for deterrence over U.S. non-nuclear capabilities.”⁹ Nuclear abolitionists argue that “Nuclear deterrence does not provide physical protection against nuclear weapons—it provides only a false sense of security and the possibility of retaliation and vengeance. Reliance on nuclear deterrence opens the door to omnicide.”¹⁰ And still other scholars argue that “to assert confidently that U.S. nuclear weapons no longer are valuable for deterrence purposes, however, is to claim knowledge about how varied contemporary and future leaders in diverse and often unpredictable circumstances” will behave, a prediction that “presumes knowledge that they do not and cannot have.”¹¹ And consequently, nuclear weapons may have a unique influence over adversary decision making.

According to Delpech, “There is currently a belief in Western societies that advances in technology may allow nuclear deterrence to be replaced by conventional deterrence.”¹² However, there are potentially dangerous consequences of relying on advanced conventional weapons for nuclear deterrence. For example, there are potentially negative proliferation implications, as “high-performing non-nuclear U.S. capabilities have... widened the U.S. conventional advantage over its potential adversaries and driven these countries to rely more on nuclear weapons and their early first use to compensate” for conventional weakness.¹³ Moreover, “A limited nuclear strike with a conventional response would call into question all other commitments, notably those related to allies.”¹⁴ As Payne notes, the United States has consistently made the assurance of allies a key policy priority, “but only allies can decide whether they are assured....available evidence suggests....that U.S. nuclear weapons are critical to the assurance of key allies.”¹⁵



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Nuclear abolitionists warn, “For ourselves, our countries and our planet, we must change our modes of thinking and end the widespread ignorance and apathy surrounding nuclear weapons. We must rid the world of nuclear weapons before they rid the world of us.”¹⁶ However, realists argue that the international system has not changed sufficiently to support complete disarmament, warning “Eliminating nuclear weapons would not improve nonproliferation policy, but it would give countries like North Korea and Iran a dangerous blackmailing power.”¹⁷

Some advocate for a “deterrence only” posture as a stepping stone to disarmament, which calls for “drastically [reducing] the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, alter its composition, and transform targeting policies while meeting reasonable requirements of deterrence.”¹⁸ However, this idea relies on the tenets of the Balance of Terror and ideas of stability that do not apply to the contemporary security environment and fails to address the deterrence value that nuclear weapons have for non-nuclear threats such as chemical or biological weapons.

Finally, other scholars argue that U.S. deterrence policy needs to be tailored to specific adversaries and threats. Consequently:

The strategic conditions of the twenty-first century call for: humility in predicting how opponents will behave, especially with regard to their ‘detrability’; defensive hedges against the possibility of surprising behavior and deterrence failure; strategies, acquisition policies, and arms control processes that can adapt flexibly to shifting U.S. strategic priorities and related force requirements; and dedicated efforts to understand opponents to the extent possible in order to tailor U.S. strategies accordingly, set priorities, and limit the prospects for surprise.¹⁹

Further, there may be a need to increase the flexibility of the U.S. nuclear arsenal in order to make deterrent threats more credible. This may mean that “in some instances, low-yield, accurate nuclear weapons may contribute to a U.S. deterrent threat that is more believable than otherwise would be the case.”²⁰ This is a complete break from the Balance of Terror orthodoxy as it suggests “the credibility of the U.S. deterrent may rest not on how much damage can be threatened à la assured destruction, but rather on how controlled is that threatened damage.”²¹

Conclusion

While the Balance of Terror formula for deterrence may have adequately addressed the unique challenges of the Cold War, its tenets are inadequate for addressing the security challenges that the contemporary security environment poses. It is clear that our “thinking about deterrence, defense, and strategic forces must adapt to the new realities of the twenty-first century.”²² However, moving beyond the Balance of Terror is easier said than done. Its easily understandable rules and the comfort that is provided by promises of predictable and reliable



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deterrence are not easily abandoned, despite rigorous research and a historical record that suggests the contrary.

As Delpech concludes:

Deterrence is a very difficult undertaking. There is good reason to think that it is more difficult now than ever before – at the very time when nuclear deterrence, pushed aside in the policy arena by space, cyberspace, and terrorism, suffers from intellectual and policy neglect. Deciphering an opponent’s perceptions and decision making is a daily cumulative business, not an improvised test of nerve in the course of brief crises.²³

Addressing these challenges requires leaving the Balance of Terror framework for deterrence and force sizing to the history of the Cold War, while reversing the atrophy in deterrence thinking and reinvigorating the deterrence debate to create a new framework for addressing current and prospective deterrence challenges.

1. Therese Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence In the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2012) p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
3. Keith Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, (National Institute Press: 2008) p. 324.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
7. Delpech, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
8. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 294.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
10. David Krieger, “10 Lessons You Should Learn About Nuclear Weapons,” *The Hill* (15 February 2019).
11. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
12. Delpech, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
13. Bruce Blair, et. Al., *The End of Nuclear Warfighting: Moving to a Deterrence-Only Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, September 2018).
14. Delpech, *op. cit.*, p. 45-46.
15. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 423.
16. Krieger, *op. cit.*
17. Delpech, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
18. Blair, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
19. Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 398.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 424.



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21. Ibid., p. 425.
22. Ibid., p. 439.
23. Delpech, op. cit., p. 14.

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